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# Farm to Seder Plate: Growing Crops in Canada With a Jewish, Feminist Touch

In rural Ontario, four Jewish women prioritize nature and ritual over the bottom line on Biblically-inspired Bela Farm.

Judy Maltz (Toronto) | Feb 11, 2016 5:01 PM

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TORONTO – When Bela Farm, a 100-plus-acre farm in southwest Ontario, has its official unveiling in June, it will have several claims to distinction.

It will be the largest Jewish educational farm ever established in North America, according to its founders. It will also be the first Jewish farm in North America designed and overseen exclusively by women. Four local activists have joined forces to create this self-described “rural center for sustainable, land-based Judaism.”

“Growing up, I started to become more interested in the environment and less in Judaism,” confesses Sabrina Malach, a professional beekeeper with a master’s degree in environmental studies, who is one of the farm's four



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founders, along with Risa Alyson Cooper, Andrea Most and Rochelle Rubinstein.



Beekeeper and Bela Farm co-founded Sabrina Malach with the hive. Credit: Courtesy, Shoresh

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“I didn’t think it was possible to connect them,” she says.  
"Only when I became involved in different Jewish environmental movements did I begin to realize that Jewish agricultural laws are based on social justice, and it made Judaism so much more relevant for me."

Bela Farm plans to incorporate Jewish practices and values

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into its ongoing operations. For example, even though it is not required by Jewish law to observe "shmita" (the practice of giving the land a rest every seven years) since it operates outside Israel, the farm has every intention of honoring the tradition.

According to Cooper, the founder and executive director of Shoresh, a Toronto-based Jewish environmentalist organization sponsoring the farm, a major focus will be producing food and other products that can be used to mark Jewish festivals.

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“We’re already making honey for Rosh Hashanah and beeswax candles for Jewish rituals,” she notes. “Once we’re up and operating on a large scale, we plan to add to our product line our own horseradish and heritage wheat matzahs for Passover.”

Also in keeping with Jewish tradition Bela Farm plans to donate a share of its crops to hunger relief programs, says Cooper.

With four women running the show, it makes sense that female empowerment will be a motif at this cutting-edge




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farm. As Malach notes, she and her partners hope, through this initiative, to finally correct what they believe to be a historical wrong.

“We’ve designed this two-acre meadow that will contain 12 different patches, each one symbolizing one of the sons of Jacob, but in the middle of these patches, there will be a gorgeous wooden structure dedicated to their sister Dinah, who hardly gets any mention at all in the Bible,” Malach says. Around this shrine to Dinah, which will also serve as a women’s retreat, an assortment of herbs considered beneficial to women’s health will be cultivated.



Dinah's Tent, a tribute to the Biblical figure of Dinah, Jacob's daughter. Credit: Courtesy, Shores

Shores, which also runs several small urban farms in downtown Toronto, began operating Bela Farm as a pilot project several years ago on a much smaller scale. In addition to running various farming ventures on a plot of land owned by Rubinstein, an artist, in the town of Hillsburgh, about an hour west of Toronto, Shores also began organizing education activities at the site, mainly for

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Rubinstein recently purchased the adjoining, much larger property but agreed to allow its owner to live there until he could no longer manage on his own. Now that he has moved away, the land has been attached to Bela Farm, allowing a major expansion of the project.

The soon-to-be-launched upgraded farm, according to its planners, will include 30 acres of native forest where Jewish community members can honor the memories of loved ones and mark life-cycle events, 20 acres of wildflowers and fruit trees meant to feed the native bee and butterfly populations, 30 beehives and 10 acres of organic vegetables.

On the 14-acre plot it currently operates, Bela Farm has already produced 1,000 jars of its own organic honey, according to Malach, “and we’ve sold every single one of them.”



The Bela Farm co-founders, with a neighbor. Left to right: Rochelle Rubinstein, Sabrina Malach, Fred Cox, Andrea Most and Risa Alyson Cooper. Credit: Courtesy, Shores

But making money, she says, is the least of their concerns. “I think that’s one of the differences in having women run a farm,” she says. “Unlike men, we put a lot of thought into how we can nurture nature and not just use the land to produce cash crops. In much of what we are planting here, like the trees and the wildflowers, our aim is to help take care of the natural world, which is what makes this such a unique project.”



**Judy Maltz**  
Haaretz Correspondent

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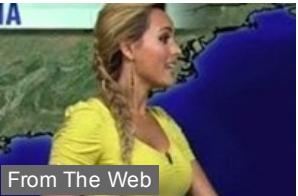
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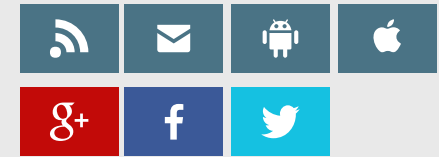


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